

LETTERS FROM READERS

Jewish Names: Old & New

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

It is no more than human that a few errors should have crept into Rabbi Benzion Kaganoff's excellent article on "Jewish Surnames Through the Ages" in the September issue. Allow me to point out two of them:

(1) Dreyfuss is not an Alsatian corruption of Troyes, but of Trèves, the French name for Trier, on the Moselle, in the Rhineland, which belonged to France under Napoleon I.

(2) Historically, Fürth cannot be considered a "suburb of Nürnberg" although in the last few decades the expanse of three and one-half miles separating the two places has been greatly built up. It is true that Fürth, which used to belong to the principality of Ansbach-Bayreuth, was the most convenient place to reside for Jews doing business in Nürnberg, but it wasn't the only one. The Free City, so proud to be "Judenrein," tolerated Jews in a number of villages within its own territory. This neat solution to Nürnberg's Jewish problem in past centuries lives on in surnames like "Schnaittacher" or "Ottensosser" while a "Fürther" is a *rara avis* among Jews. (I myself am a native of Fürth.)

L. SELIGSBERGER

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TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

In discussing present-day name changes in Israel, Rabbi Benzion C. Kaganoff states that "no direct legislative pressure is being applied" to promote the adoption of Hebrew surnames. However, there is pressure of another sort. For example, after the visit to South Africa of the Israeli vessel *Misgav*, commanded by an officer named Vishnievsky, Ben Gurion informed the Israeli Chief of Staff that in the future "no officer will be sent abroad in a representative capacity unless he bears a Hebrew family name," adding that "soldiers like civilians are entitled to all the civil rights, including the doubtful 'right' [quotation marks in the original] to preserve their foreign . . . family names" (*Haaretz*, June 15, 1955).

Ben Gurion has also publicly exerted pressure, as when he introduced one of his new ministers, Lubyanker, to the Israeli Knesset

and asked him in front of the parliamentarians, "When are you going to change your name?" (Lubyanker is now Lavon.) I have also been told by one prominent Israeli that he is still resisting efforts to make him Hebraize his well-known name, with little hope of holding out....

The people of Israel have every right to change their names. In fact, when done voluntarily, it is a fine gesture of solidarity with the new Israel that enriches the treasure of Jewish patronymics. But it should be left to the individual and not to public opinion to decide whether or not a Diaspora name evokes "painful associations."

The transformation of Jewish family names tells us a great deal about the social climate in which Jews were or are living at a given time, and provides a colorful illustration of Jewish history. Let those who cherish historical associations in their names keep them, and let others change as they see fit. A name is too personal a matter to be tampered with by outsiders, be they Jewish or non-Jewish.

ERNEST MAASS

Jamaica, New York

Robert Graves Demurs

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

Gratified as I am by being considered worthy of a profile in COMMENTARY, I find that Mr. Arnold Sherman has made a number of misstatements which greatly embarrass me. Here are a few:

1) He did not accidentally meet me on a beach. He first came knocking at my door, without an introduction, and asked for a brief interview for a local Palma paper. I gave it to him, telling him just what to say. He printed it, and that was that. I gave him no authority to publish an interview in the U. S.

2) My only comment on American swimmers was that most of them like the water warmer than it ever gets in Britain; hence on cold days one can distinguish Americans from British.

3) I did *not* dive into the Mediterranean on the beach where we afterwards met. The water there is only about a foot deep for some twenty yards out.

4) I do *not* stack my books several feet high